



# Tornado Response

Story by Mitch Frazier





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2LT Jamie Melchert

WHEN a tornado hit the southern Missouri town of Stockton shortly after 6:30 p.m. on May 5, employees of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers put thoughts of their own losses aside to help those who lost everything.

Hours after the Category F-3 tornado tore through Stockton, environmental specialists, power-plant operators, park rangers and support staff from the Corps' nearby Stockton Dam and reservoir project office emerged from their storm-battered homes to provide emergency service to the 1,700 residents.

"As soon as we realized how extensive the damage was to our office, we mobilized our equipment and manpower and began wading through the rubble," said Rod Hendricks, a natural-resources specialist. "We immediately sent backhoes and other equipment into town to reopen the roadways for emergency traffic."

Traffic was nonexistent in the wake of the storm. Toppled trees, sparking power lines, building materials and storm-tossed vehicles littered roadways, making it impossible for

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Missouri National Guard soldiers helped with cleanup efforts after a series of tornadoes devastated towns throughout the state.

Among the buildings heavily damaged by the twister that struck Pierce City was the National Guard armory (at upper left). Statewide, tornadoes killed 18 people.





Rod Hendricks of USACE's Kansas City District sifts through the remains of the Stockton Lake project office destroyed by a tornado on May 4.

emergency responders to assess the situation. The Corps team worked until midnight clearing the debris from the town's main road and reopening a path for emergency responders.

"The storm had essentially closed the city," said Ian Hafer, president of the local emergency-planning commission in Stockton. "We knew it was extremely important to reopen the roadways as soon as possible and allow ambulances and the fire department access to the scene, but we had limited staffing. We're fortunate the Corps helped make that happen during those first critical hours."

As the sun rose the next day, the storm-caused destruction was in full view. The town was nearly destroyed. The car lot and gas station that stood alongside the town's main highway were piles of bent metal, crumpled cars and debris. Homes atop the town's hills were reduced to mounds of shingles and splintered wood.

Throughout town, residents, including the 22 employees at Stockton Dam, awoke to their first glimpse

The home of USACE employee Sharon Belcher was one of hundreds destroyed by the tornado that swept through Stockton, Mo.

of the storm's destruction.

"I was expecting it to be really bad," said Donna Butler, a Corps administrative specialist who weathered the storm in a neighbor's storm shelter with her husband and two dogs. "It was just total devastation beyond anything I could have imagined."

After making her way through town, Butler and her co-workers arrived to find their office in a similar state. A pile of bricks and mounds of twisted steel and furniture stood where the office had been. The storm had torn the roof from the brick building, and winds had shredded documents, pictures and brochures.

Trucks and vans once used to patrol and maintain the 50,000-acre dam complex were thrown into a nearby maintenance shed, damaging the building and all the vehicles.

Fortunately, the nearby dam and hydroelectric plant stood untouched.

"I experience the same shock over and over again every time I see this," said office automation specialist Rachael Graves as she made her way

through the remains.

Time hasn't eliminated the woes of cleanup workers either. Less than a week after the storm struck Stockton, city officials ran out of places to pile the tons of debris. They looked to the Corps for help.

Local emergency planners asked for land on the Stockton complex to use as a temporary collection point for the hundreds of tons of tree limbs that littered the city. The Corps offered an old quarry for temporary storage.

Although Hendricks and his team continue to support the city of Stockton as the town begins to rebuild, he said the mission of the Corps in the city is clear.

"It is paramount we continue to keep Stockton Lake functioning for the well-being of the local economy," Hendricks said. "When the lake is open and functioning, people come here and spend money. That money will be critical to rebuilding this area."

Annually, Stockton welcomes more than 1 million visitors to its lake, campground and nature areas. 🇺🇸

Mitch Frazier (both)





Mitch Frazier

The tornado damage in Stockton was completely random; destroyed houses like this one sat next to others that were untouched.

# Tornado Troopers

Story by MSG Bob Haskell

NATIONAL Guard soldiers answered the call to help civil authorities deal with the devastation of numerous deadly tornadoes that hammered the Midwest in May. At the same time, they dealt with the aftermath of floods in Alabama.

Some 200 Army Guard soldiers were on duty in Missouri, Kansas and Tennessee by May 6, after a massive tornado system ravaged those states. Six more National Guard soldiers were on active duty in Alabama, according to reports from the Army National Guard's Readiness Center in Arlington, Va.

Missouri fielded the largest force of Guard soldiers — 173 — after tornadoes killed 18 people in that state and at least 40, collectively, from all the states affected, according to National Weather Service reports and others.

One of the victims was Wanda Sue Handley, 46, the wife of SPC William Handley, of the Missouri Guard. She was killed in her home in Monett, Mo., Guard officials reported.

Handley is a member of the 203rd Engineer Battalion and had been on active duty at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., since he was mobilized in March.

Handley was talking with his wife on his cellular phone, "when she told him, 'I see it,' and then the phone went dead," said Company C's 1SG Randy Mackey. "He was in shock."

Handley received immediate approval to return to his home.

The Missouri tornadoes badly damaged Guard armories in Pierce City and DeSoto. And President George W. Bush issued federal disaster declarations for 39 counties in Missouri and seven counties in Kansas.

Guard soldiers from the 110th Engr. Bn., in Kansas City; Co. A, 735th Main Support Bn., in Nevada, Mo.; and Co. C, 935th Spt. Bn., in Aurora and Springfield, were sent to badly damaged Pierce City, Gladstone and Stockton.

National Guard spokesman SFC Ron Holbrook reported that Guard troops initially set up generators to provide power for water pumps, and about 70 Guard soldiers helped police patrol streets in hard-hit Pierce City, an historic railroad town in Missouri's southwest corner.

Guard soldiers delivered four large generators to Pierce City and seven to Stockton to help generate electricity for emergency needs, said 2LT Jamie Melchert.

About 125 of the 203rd's soldiers were allowed to leave Fort Leonard Wood to help their families and communities recover from the damage. They were expected to return to the installation soon after, to await deployment orders to Iraq.

Several of the 203rd's soldiers had experienced nature's wrath while serving in Honduras in 1999, to help that country recover from Hurricane Mitch, they said.

"That was a cakewalk, compared to what happened here," said SSG Ed Hatfield. "This is unbelievable." 🚩

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